

What is the Function of Public Art?

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Introduction

From villages, populated cities and the motorways between them, we are invited to gaze upon the public art that is constructed on various sites in multiple materials, traditional and contemporary. Public sculptures are placed in different locations around Ireland and are brought about by different means and people. Artworks are often placed in these areas with the hope that the work will help improve the environment and encourage residents to have greater care for their locality (Selwood, 1995, p.2) but this is not always the result of the work. Some artworks in the public realm are overlooked and neglected, while other works are preserved, cared for and hold deep meaning for the locals.

The aim of this research essay is to explore public artworks within Ireland and to try and understand what their functions are. This research essay will begin by briefly outlining what public art is? Then a short introduction to the Per Cent for Art Scheme. Followed by an overview of what the function of public art is. This feeds into the main body of the text which will revolve around the public artworks being discussed ranging from their commissioning process, aesthetic presence and functions.

Some questions that need to be asked are, how and why the concept of creating a work of art for an area comes about? Who commissions the artwork and following on from that who chooses the final piece? These questions are just the butt of an ever-growing root of questions that can only be answered by focusing on an artwork and following its path from the starting line. This is the only way to try and achieve a clear understanding of a piece of public art from its commissioning to its purpose and realisation. The reason for this is because of the wide range and possible routes the artwork can take from the question, 'why is the artwork being commissioned'?

To attempt to explore these questions, the essay will focus on three main public artworks in Ireland. *Home*, by Leo Higgins, *Famine*, by Rowan Gillespie and *St Maeldoid's Diving Pig*, by David Annand. Each artwork has taken an individual route from the start to the end of its commission. The artworks are unique in many ways from their commissioning brief to their aesthetic appearance and the concept in which it aims to represent.

What is Public Art?

One of the greatest flaws of public art is perhaps its definition. Public art is a term used to describe art that is in the public domain although works can be outside in private spaces (Shaffrey, 2010, p.4). This is just one subtle contradiction that surrounds public art and how it is often perceived as art that is on view and accessible to all. This is possibly one of the key functions of public art, by situating the work in public it helps to broaden the audience from that of the usual gallery-goer. Using various locations like villages and national motorways helps to make this possible. One might ask if these locations need an artwork, or is it being used to host art, as it could help develop a sense of community (Selwood, 1995, p.22).

The history of artworks in the public domain remains permanent with people and this influences what they think it should look like. Work constructed in traditional materials such as bronze or stone can be perceived as money well spent (Shaffrey, 2010, p.07). This also gives a sense that the work is “permanent, static and object-based” (Selwood, 1995, p.07). The plinth also plays an important role for people that are not knowledgeable about what art is? When art is not on a plinth it can be questioned whether it is art or not. Although it can be argued in reverse also.

Commemorative work is highly regarded as being a permanent feature of public art. Works being designed and dedicated to a memorial of historical war

heroes or victims of war are common. There are many examples of towering pillars, men on large horsebacks and noble warriors all of which have become the face of what a common memorial artwork is meant to look like (Tipton, 2006, p.11).

As the sides of the motorways in Ireland have become a pedestal for public art, public artworks have moved from the common memorial artworks. In Ireland, many public artworks are now viewed, if at all, as they are passed by at an average of one hundred kilometres an hour. The primary reason for this is because of their commissioning background through the Per Cent for Art Scheme.

Per Cent for Art Scheme

The Per Cent for Art Scheme was introduced by the government in 1978. It allocates one percent of the total cost of a publicly funded development towards the commissioning of a work of art. Since 1997 the programme is available to all projects from public housing and buildings to transport and roads (Publicart.ie, 2008). Having the Per Cent for Art programme helps to keep art in the public domain and encourages steady employment of artists and craftspeople (Shaw, 1991, p.12). The scheme also helps put on display to the public the broad range of styles, techniques, and materials that can be used to create an artwork and to help people to understand that art comes in many contemporary forms and not just the traditional. Therefore, the Per Cent for Art could be seen “to make contemporary arts and crafts more accessible to the public” (Shaw, 1991, p.16).

What is the function of public art?

This question is frequently asked by many people about artworks, but it is often asked in a less civil manner. Although it is a simple question, the answer is not always straight forward. Certainly, the main aim of public art is portrayed as a way of giving the public access to art outside of the galleries and museums (Lacy, 1995,

p.22). However, does a public artwork have to have a function? This could be just as a reasonable question to the question. There are many different functions that can be implemented into an artwork or tried to be achieved by using an artwork. Some examples range from work to encourage tourism, social amelioration, social regeneration or simply be aesthetic ornaments for different areas (Finkelpearl, 2000, p.20).

These functions are not always clear from the face of the piece of work and rarely is it ever articulated. This is normal as not many artists will stand and explain what it is their work is about, it is up to the viewer to draw a conclusion from it, if any. Circling back to the question of ‘why the work is being commissioned’ can help aid the answer of what is the deeper function of the artwork?

The following part of the text will look at the three individual artworks from their commissioning process to how they are instrumentalized. It will explore various functions that they might perform. Many can intertwine and overlap depending on the commissioning process or location of the artwork. Focusing on the three artworks is only logical as all artworks are individual and no two are the same.

Home

Leo Higgins is a self-taught Irish sculptor he was born in Dublin in 1951. He is a founder of what is now known as Visual Artist Ireland which is a representative body for visual artists in Ireland that offers support and opportunities to artists at any stage of their career. Higgins has produced public artworks that include ‘Justice’ that was for the Criminal Courts in Dublin and ‘Riverrun’ that was for The Dublin UNESCO City of Literature Garden.

Home (Fig.1) is a public memorial sculpture that was unveiled in 2000 by Mary McAleese who was the President at the time. The site of the sculpture is in

Dublin's North Inner City at the junction of Sean MacDermott Street and Buckingham Street. This is an area of the city that was populated with drug dealers and drug use was extremely common. This resulted in many lives being destroyed and families losing loved ones. *Home* is a memorial to the children who died as a result of heroin use in the area (Tipton, 2006, p.35).



Fig.1 Leo Higgins, *Home* (2000).

Using objects to remember someone is a poignant act that is common in humans. Such as teddy bears or toys to our lost children or a favourite object or item of the person that has passed. These can be processed as symbols of remembrance and grief. Decorative stars were a symbol used by the locals in the affected area in

the North Inner City. These stars each represent a loved one that has died as a result of heroin addiction and each year the stars are hung on the Christmas tree (Tipton, 2006, p.35) which originally owned the site of the memorial, but now it shares it with *Home*.

The concept of creating something permanent to commemorate the people who had died as a result of heroin use came to surface when the local support group ICON (Inner City Organisations Network) expressed the community members want for something permanent. The community workers and the Fire Station began to discuss the possibilities of this happening (Tipton, 2006, p.36). Connections and conversations grew with the inclusion of more organisations like the Dublin Corporation's Arts Office and North City IAP (Integrated Area Partnership). Support and funding also came from the Arts Council who contributed €12,697 to the commission as a starting point (Tipton, 2006, p.36). This is a prime example of how the concept of a public art memorial strives from being a concept to the implementation of funding. Starting at the root, with the community.

The next step of the process was to set up an artistic advisory panel that compiled of Pauline Cummins, Robert Ballagh, and Eileen McDonagh. This panel was formed to represent the artistic side of the project while ICON supported the community. These two groups fostered an "open and organic" (Tipton, 2006, p.36) relationship between the relatives and artists (Tipton, 2006, p36).

After "a long period of collaboration with the community" (Tipton, 2006, p.36) six artists out of the twenty-four that were invited to take part in the project exhibited their five concepts in model form in the Fire Station Studios. The members of the community came to see the maquettes and the "decision was made that the

relatives would be the ones to select the final memorial” (Tipton, 2006, p.36). The artwork selected from the maquettes was *Home* by Leo Higgins.

Home is very much so a traditional sculpture as can be seen through its use of materials and aesthetic appearance. The large-scale form of the sculpture is made from limestone that depicts a doorway. Framed inside the limestone doorway is a gilded bronze flame. Both components of the sculpture are intimately linked to the idea of home and hope.

Having the community members chose the artwork was a unique part of the process which continued throughout the commission as the community members were "invited to bring memories and mementos, pieces of the lives of those they had lost to heroin, to be cast into the bronze flame of *Home*” (Tipton, 2006, p.53).

Art in the public domain has a responsibility to do and say something, it should hold some connection to its location and to the people it is presented to. Leo Higgins has accomplished this in *Home*. Ownership of the memorial has been in the community members' hands from the beginning as they played a key role in the commissioning process from handpicking the artwork to embedding meaningful objects into the bronze while casting the flame. The residents voiced their want for a permanent memorial and now they have a memorial that symbolises the coming together of residents that worked side by side with artists to create a monument to and for themselves (Tipton, 2006, p.38).

Home is a unique sculpture; it physically marks a spot in a community where people can grief loved ones. The primary function of the monument is to create social cohesion among the affected residents. For an outsider looking on at the sculpture, it is just another piece of public art that they might question and critique not knowing its purpose. However, it really holds a deeper function for the people it

represents and serves. A gesture made to the memorial by someone was captured by Gemma Tipton; “My first personal understanding of these strong feelings came to me as I saw an older man pause when passing the memorial. He discreetly placed his hand on the bronze sculpture, closing his eyes and bowing his head for a moment before moving on” (Tipton, 2006, p.7). This delicate nod to the artwork shows its importance and illustrates how it truly does serve a purpose to its public.

Famine

One of the chief events that altered Ireland’s history was the Great Famine from 1845 to about 1851. Disaster had struck the land with the potato blight and as a result, around one million people died. One million more emigrated from the country and the population dropped by twenty to twenty-five percent (*Famine Memorial*, 2020)

Some nationalists might say, “the Almighty send the potato blight, but the English created the famine” (Hertz. K (2017). The British colonial rule over the land is the main reason why there were no monuments dedicated to the Great Famine in Ireland until recent decades. This was because the English did not want any monuments devoted to Irish history (Marshall, 2014, p09).

After Irish independence in 1922, this began to change. However, the Great Famine was not the first event to be commemorated through a public memorial. Instead, "Irish culture merely followed in the tradition of public monuments laid down in other countries, which sought to commemorate and inspire heroic action, rather than to mark trauma" (Marshall, 2014, p09). Dublin sculptor Rowan Gillespie played an important part in changing this poignant fact.

Gillespie is an Irish sculptor born in Dublin in 1953 and soon after, along with his family emigrated to Cyprus. Rowan studied sculpture at Kingston College of

Art in London. He returned to Ireland in 1977, where he remains in Dublin working to this day.

In 1989 Rowan began to focus on site-specific art. He has since created many public sculptures in Ireland and around the world. Rowan is very much a one-man show as he works independently from start to finish, he also owns his own foundry (*About Rowan Gillespie, 2019*). One of Gillespie's unique public sculpture commissions is *Famine* (Fig.2). Located at Custom House Quay in Dublin's Docklands. The sculpture comprised of bronze figures is a commemorative work to those who were forced to emigrate during the famine. The memorial is well situated as its site is where one of the first of many ships full of emigrants sailed from on St. Patrick's Day 1846 (*The Famine Memorial, 2019*).



Fig.2 Rowan Gillespie, *Famine* (1997).

Famine is a work comprised of eight figures of men and women. Included is a child draped across a man's shoulders while it is not clear if the dog depicted is accompanying the group or preying on them. The figures appear to be wrapped in nothing more than rags that fall loosely over their frail bodies. Their harrowing facial expressions standing out as they travel with slumped shoulders, projecting their exhaustion. The figures are cast in bronze a little larger than life-size and mounted on ground level. Choosing not to use a plinth gives the viewers the chance to walk around the figures and not to be intimidated by a towering statue. It helps to create the realisation for the viewer that this is representing a sad and distressing time in Irish history.

The commemorative work was brought about by private funding and was commissioned in 1997 for Dublin City by Norma Smurfit (The Famine Memorial, 2019). Although this was a generous tribute to the City by Smurfit it begs the question of why such a memorial wasn't funded by the state as the famine is a prominent mark in Irish history.

The primary function of this memorial is laid out to commemorate the lives lost during the famine, "a point of reminder to future generations of past events, physical markers even while society may have forgotten" (Tipton, 2006, p.14). The location in which it is placed plays a vital role in their story and in the same year, the sculpture was commissioned a major project to physically, socially and economically regenerate former dockland areas began (Regeneration, 2020). Does this memorial therefore act as a "cultural investment" (Selwood, 1995, p01)? Or was cultural tourism the main aim for the commissioning of *Famine* (Tipton, 2006, p.15)? Is the function of the work more about economic values than of a commemorative purpose? This may not matter for the fact that the work was commissioned as a gift

for the city. Personal opinions might decide on the answers but one's morals might help to sway one's opinion.

St. Maeldoids Diving Pig

Legend has it that in the sixth century a black pig persistently removed bricks at night from a site where St. Maeldoid had begun to construct a church. The original site was at Concra on one side of Lough Muckno located in Castleblaney town in Co. Monaghan. The ruins of the church are all that stand today on the east side of the lake where the pig had been moving the bricks to and where St. Maeldoid completed the construction of the church (Byrne, 2014).

This folk tale is one that has inspired a work of art that sits up high on one of the many embankments and laybys of Irish roads that are ever-growing pedestals for public art. The embankment is situated just outside Castleblaney in Co. Monaghan on the N2 Dublin to Derry road. The road is part of a major bypass that has rerouted heavy traffic from the town of Castleblaney. As part of the Per Cent for Art Scheme €100,000 funding was allocated towards an artwork for the bypass. The work was commissioned by The National Roads Authority. After its commissioning a public competition opened and the final work was chosen by Monaghan County Council (St. Maeldoid's Pig, [no date]).

The chosen artist was Scottish sculptor David Annand. Annand has worked as a sculptor since he left college and has been successful with works being commissioned for the public domain. Many of his works are throughout Ireland and the UK. Annand continues to work and live in Scotland while he remains a member of the Royal Society of Sculptors (Annand, 2020). The Royal Society of Sculptors is an organisation run by artists that hold exhibitions and bring together sculptors at

different stages in their careers to support one and another (The Royal Society, 2020).

St. Maeldoids Diving Pig (Fig.3) is a large-scale pig manufactured out of bare aluminium. The pig poses as it rears up on its hind legs on its concrete base that is embedded into the steep elevated embankment along the N2. The only way for the piece to be viewed is to have a glance as you pass by in a car or to pull into the layby a short distance away and look up at it from below. One might wonder if the artwork is seen by many as they pass by “the sow on the brow” (“THE SOW, 2014).



Fig.3 David Annand, *St. Maeldoids Diving Pig* (2014).

Even though many locals will know of its existence the idea of the statue being overlooked is a possible fact. One councillor Brendan Hughes made his opinion clear on the matter when he referred to the use of a pig to depict Castleblayney as a monstrosity when it is a town that is well known for its musical people (Byrne, 2014). If the statue was to depict a musician from the area would Mr.

Hughes's opinion be different, or would it have a similar response to any artwork put in place of the pig?

As David tries to connect the artwork to the area as he explains here that “each time I am commissioned I try to use a local poet. The poetry slows down passers-by and helps them relate to the piece” (Annand, 2020). An example of this can also be seen on the side of the N2 at Carrickmacross, just one town away from Castleblayney. It is a sculpture by David depicting people on stilts from a poem by Patrick Kavanagh.

However, in this case, to connect the work to the site, he has used a local myth and it appears it has received some backlash. The other obvious fact is that passers-by are unable to slow down and relate to the piece as they pass by at one hundred kilometres an hour. This may be the fault of The National Roads Authority as they positioned the pig on top of the mound out of reach and “half-hid” (“THE SOW, 2014) among the vast grass embankment.

Judging from the image of David’s proposal (Fig.4) of what the artwork will look like it was not intended to be put almost out of sight. Although the burden of this may be laid upon the County Council by locals for selecting the piece along with the opinion that the artwork is a waste of money (Robinson, 2014). Even if it is the case that the comments about the work are negative, some critics would say one of the best things public art can do is create controversy, that way it still gets the public to interact.



Fig.4 David Annand, Proposal for *St. Maeldoids Diving Pig* (2014).

As the main aim of public art has been established as broadening the audience, it begs the question that is the aim truly fulfilled by public road art? The Per Cent for Art Scheme provides good funding for the arts and offers an opportunity for art to be experienced by the Irish public, but art experienced through a window passing by at an average of the national speed limit is not thoroughly getting a feel for the artwork, that can “make an impact and create lasting memories” (PUBLIC ART, 2004, p.5).

A positive result that came from the by-pass was the reduction in traffic, noise, and pollution from the town and extended villages (Scéim an Bhóthair N2, 2007, p.2). Along with a benefit comes a disadvantage, and that is the economic knock-on that the road had to businesses in the town. It could be questioned whether this artwork is a way of giving a gift back to the community after having a negative impact on many businesses in the area, or if it is a way to try and visually enhance the area as it suffers from an economic decline (Hewitt, 2012, p.34). There is also the possibility that it is an attempt to enhance cultural tourism. With the use of the local myth, it is an attempt to connect the work to the site. Therefore, a piece that includes the history

of the area is trying to expose its relevance to the location and as a result, it becomes quite close to tourism promotion (Finkelpearl, 2000, p.41). Although the idea of the artwork potentially functioning as a mythical tourist attraction is absurd and quite humorous.

Conclusion

Exploring public art and trying to answer the question of '*what is the function of public art?*', has created more questions than it has answered. It is possible that there are no correct answers to these questions, only opinions and preferences. Each of these being unique and individual, just as each member of the public is. If people continue to have their opinions, positive or negative, about the artworks then that can be the function of the artwork. Opening discourse around the artworks that creates social interactions within the public domain. This happens in the space between the work of art and the audience. Even if the viewer does not contain knowledge around what art is or does, even if they ignore the work itself, subconsciously they still play a part in activating the work.

If artists gave the public what they wanted, something they were accustomed to then it wouldn't open the door to art, it would close the door on creativeness. Art has the ability to help change and develop people. Public art has the capability of holding a deeper function, to say and do something for its environment and public, rather than just putting art on show for a wider audience.

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Illustration source:

Leo Higgins, *Home*, 2000, Limestone and gilded bronze. Located at the junction of

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David Annand, Proposal for *St. Maeldoids Diving Pig*, 2014. Image sourced from

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